

Tape # 72

Interview with Jack R. Evans

Date 8/30/08

Interviewed by Chuck Dunkerly

Transcribed and Logged by Kris Charas

Checked by

Tape #72

00:10

CD: Jack, you were describing the oil and the flames, could you pick up the story...

JE: Yes, yes... I was trying to get across the idea that everything was burning. There was fire everywhere, and I'm talking Battleship Row. When I looked across the way to the naval station, it wasn't burning. There were large parts of Ford Island that were not burning. But there was all this oil on the water that transferred those fires from one ship to the other. It was... it was really terrible. We had a lot of our boats on the water, boats that had belonged to the different ships, but they were... they had been trying to get people from ashore to the ships who had been out the night before, and uh, there were a lot of sailors blown into the water and they were trying to pick them up. And there were so many different things demanding their attention that they just took all these different jobs as best they could. The small boats did a great job that day, and very bravely, stayed right in there, they didn't waiver. I was proud of them.

(1:45) We uh, we had terrible fires on board the Tennessee, our whole stern was on fire. You think of steel ships, you know they don't burn. Well all of the rivets in our stern melted. And uh, officer's country, which is right in the stern region, was all flooded from the water flowing in. So, it was a hot fire. And uh, the man who fought the ship, who was the leader of the USS Tennessee was a warrant, W-4 warrant bosun. His name Bosun Atkins. And he was at least 60 years old. (laughing) What a man he was! He was in full dress whites, and he was *everywhere* directing the fight, you know. When I was looking, you might wonder why a lookout could look around and see all these things, well, we had about 12 people up there, and for, to report all the aircraft coming in. Takes only 2. So, we didn't spend much time reporting the aircraft. A couple of guys were doing that, and uh, and everything looked good. So the rest of us were gawking at all these happenings that were going on. But... Boson Atkins, I never heard of him getting a medal for it, but he sure should have. He put the fires out, and he had dress whites, and they had singes and burns all over them (*chuckling*)... He was a fantastic individual. And

uh... I was so proud of him. And when the battle started, our senior officers were not on board. I think that during the battle they did get on board, but uh, they were not actively directing operations during the first part of the battle. And then... so they were playing catch up. But uh, it was an interesting... (*crew starts moving around and distracts Jack*)

4:20 CREW ACTIVITY

4:54

CD: What was your proudest moment that day, Jack?

JE: I think uh, I think it's when I looked down and uh, saw what the people were doing on the main deck. They were the ones I could see most clearly, because the others were enclosed in areas in the super structure. And uh, but when I looked at all the men down there doing the different things that they had to do, and uh, there were some machine gun bullets striking the deck, and uh visibly splintering the deck, and these guys never wavered. They didn't slow down one bit, they just went right into harms way and uh, took their chances. And I was really proud of them. It uh, and I was actually for the whole day. Everyone was, was uh pretty heroic. I don't, I don't recall seeing any real cowardice (*coward eyes?*). You know, people hiding. That sort of thing. Not from where I was. So I was proud of our people. And uh, and I was sad for all of us for what was happening. And I knew that thousands of men had been killed. I knew they were dead. I could see many of the dead. And I felt terrible about that. It's uh... It's not easy. And uh, the bod... a lot of bodies were floating in the water. Another job the boats took on is uh, they started picking up the dead and uh, taking... they had a central collection point over at A'ia (*sp?*), and uh, some of the boats had pieces of line that had loops tied into them, and they'd go along and just loop this around the deceased individual's head, and uh, they would be trailing as many as 10 different bodies. So it was an awful lot to be done and under difficult conditions. I... (*long pause here reflecting*) **(8:02)**We were the losers, you know. They achieved their objective. They came over to knock out the battleships, and they did. They didn't know we were going to repair them so fast (*chuckling*)! Which we did. And of course, the reason that we repaired them so fast is that the Japanese didn't knock out the repair facility. Uh, and that repair facility had the Tennessee back under way on the 20th of December. And uh, that's pretty fast. They also didn't hit the tank farm. And uh, I was not a very well trained in those days, I didn't know about targets, and tactical and strategical planning, and all of those factors. But, it did look kind of funny that that whole area over where that repair facility was and that tank farm was untouched. You know. And of course, if they knocked

out the tank farm, they would have put the battleships out of operation for probably a year and a half. Because, it takes fuel oil to run those things. And a lot of it. But later I learned that there was to be a third strike. And uh, in the third strike was when they planned to get the repair facility and the tank farm. And of course the Japanese admiral didn't know where the carriers were, and he was getting antsy. And after they reported to him the success of the attack, he said 'that's it, we're heading home.' And he recalled all the planes, turned around, and went back to Japan. But it cost him a great deal because we were back fighting them so fast. And it was interesting that the Tennessee went to Bremerton, Washington. And we got repairs over a period of 3 months, and in 3 months we took off and headed for the battle of Coral Sea. And that was uh, a battle where we lost the Lexington, an aircraft carrier. It was the first actual battle where the enemy meets enemy, between the Japanese. The other was a sneak attack. We didn't really have the chance to put up our best fight. But uh, 3 months it was the battle of Coral Sea, and the reason we went to the Coral Sea was because most of the admirals in the Navy were battleship admirals. And they still felt that if there's going to be a major naval engagement that you've gotta have battleships there. And so they sent six old battle wagons down to Coral Sea. And we came back to the states, and they did it again. They sent us to Midway. And during the battle of Midway, there were six old battleships out there going in a circle 90 miles from the action, which I find very interesting...

11:55

CD: Absolutely is... absolutely is. Could you tell me how you got your Purple Heart, what that incident was?

JE: Yes... the bomb that hit our turret number 2 penetrated to the bore of that center gun, back near the base where it's an immense barrel, you know... and it threw a lot of steel shrapnel... some of it went over to the West Virginia, and it was that bomb that killed their commanding officer. And some it came up through the bottom of the decking in the foretop, and uh, I didn't realize I was hit at all. I didn't feel anything. And uh... It was uh, it was about 2 hours after the attack that I was standing up there and suddenly one of the guys said, "hey Jack, you're bleeding." And I looked down and there were 4 tracks of dried blood on each leg... (*smiling*) Dried! And I never felt a thing you know. It uh, course I, it was not a major wound, I had steel slivers, I had fragments, I had paint chips, you know. It was a conglomeration. Because the actual fragment had come between my feet where it went through the base floor. And there was a small stanchion in front of me, perhaps 4 inches in diameter. And the shrapnel hit that, and the fragments from that are what hit me in both

legs. And uh, I was hit about the same in both legs. There were multiple points of entry in the flesh, but none of it very serious. All they had to do was dig the splinters out with tweezers, and put some Merthiolate on that and then say 'get back to active duty, get up in the foretop, get outta' here.' And that's the way I got the Purple Heart.

14:25

CD: What's your clearest most vivid memory of that day?

JE: Uh, gee that's a hard question for me, because uh, I uh... death and destruction, you know. They just hit us so many places and so hard, that uh, you know, I'll never forget it. There was uh, after 3 days, there was a terrible odor throughout the harbor. Uh, and some of it was burnt oil, some of it was from all of the gunpowder that had gone off and drifted out, and uh, I remember it as the smell of death. You know, I'll always think of it that way... So that's about as close as I can get really...

15:52

CD: No that's poignant. When you go out to the memorial, and stand on that structure over that sunken, or rested ship, what thoughts go through your mind when you're there?

JE: I remember the day, and I remember what happened. And I remember the people I knew who died that day. Uh, actually I didn't know very many of the people that died that day, because my ship only lost 5 lives. That's probably because we were inboard, and we had a battleship behind us, a battleship in front of us, a battleship alongside, and they're the ones who got all the torpedoes. And they all lost a lot of men. We didn't. The Maryland didn't either. She was inboard. But uh, but those are the things I think about, and I have special thoughts for the Arizona... (**17:05** [*gets emotional*]) And then I think, that... that it could have been us. Because that bomb that hit turret number 2 was such an armor piercing bomb, that if it had gone either side of that center gun it would have gone to the forward magazine and we would have been a second Arizona. So, sometimes you just hang on by a thread (*holds up thumb and forefinger*), you know. It just doesn't have your name on it. It's... it's uh, very hard to predict who's gonna' die and who's not gonna' die. And you wonder about those things, and uh, and of course there is no answer. That's why military men are a little bit fatalistic. Yeah, they do their jobs and they take their chances. Yeah.

18:20

CD: There are a lot of people who go to that memorial every year. (*CD says something here that's unclear; "Charlie ?????"*)

JE: Yeah, I've noticed over the years that an awful lot of Japanese visit the Arizona memorial. I did get a chance to know some of the pilots. Their attitude was that, uh, 'we're really sorry that this had to happen, but uh, we were military men and we were simply doing what we were told to do. It wasn't our idea to attack Pearl Harbor, it was our superiors who told us to attack Pearl Harbor. So when we, when we did attack and drop our bombs and fire our bullets into you, it was not with any hate in our hearts, it was merely doing a job.' And some of my comrades couldn't buy that, and wouldn't buy that. And I know several of them who to this day have never spoken to a Japanese, knowingly. They won't speak to them. I thought it would be worthwhile to speak to them, so I have. I even briefed a group of them, one day.

19:57

CD: Did you buy their explanation?

JE: Yes, yes! Because I'm a military man, too. I do the same thing. I carry out my orders, you know. That's exactly what they were doing. And uh, as you listen to things that are said by Japanese who participated in that attack, you don't read any hostility into their voices. Fujita, he became a minister after that, the leader of the air attack. Yeah, I believe them.

20:36

CD: Do you have any thoughts you would want to share with the visitors who go out there who might be just be starting to learn about this piece of our history?

JE: Well, uh, the motto of the Pearl Harbor Association is "Remember Pearl Harbor. Keep America alert." And uh, America doesn't do that job very well. It's always the same problem. And I guess it will be forever more. But uh, we get out of a war, and we recover from the financial expenses, and we start living normal lives, and suddenly the politicians say, "well, we don't need this big military anymore." And so they start cutting back on the military, and they cut back on the number of ships, and they cut back on the number of airplanes, and uh, suddenly you're militarily unprepared again. And uh, it's happened in every war we've been in. It happened in World War I. It happened in World War II. President Roosevelt had a terrible time building up the armed forces in preparation for World War II. And uh... He had to cheat a little bit sometimes to help at all, and he did, to his credit. But uh, they want to take the money from the military and redistribute it to society in one form or another and... it's a dumb thing to do. So we keep trying to remind people that uh, you're safest

when you're militarily strong. And uh, Ronald Reagan understood that principle. So, he wasn't one of those presidents who doled out so much money. Uh, and as a consequence he was able to win the Cold War for us. Because we were militarily strong, and Russia was afraid to do anything. But uh, the Korean War for example. We had a Secretary of State, his name was Dean Acheson, and he announced to the world that Korea was not included in our sphere of interest. And, so, the North Koreans hit. You know, they say 'well if the United States isn't interested, we don't have anything to worry about.' And of course that led to a United Nations action and got all the way up to Douglas MacArthur and Harry Truman having their big fight with each other. But again, military unpreparedness that got us into the pickle. Even today, the politicians are drooling to get their hands on military money. They're promising more programs to try and win this election, *(laughing)* you can imagine! And once they start trying to pay for those programs, where are they gonna' get the money? From the military. It seems to always work that way. But anyway, so "Keep America Alert." You know, let's not forget Pearl Harbor, **(25:00)** *(faint motorcycle engine sounds)* that if you're not strong you'll get a sneak attack because they think they can knock you out. *(Motorcycle from outside gets louder and louder from here)* And if you're militarily strong they won't do it, because they're afraid of you.

25:09

CD: You hear that?

JE: I do that, now.

CD: I think you stopped just in time, actually.

JE: Yeah, yeah, that's a real loud one.

CD: That one really was.

JE: My hearing aids are not the greatest things in the world.

CD: Uhm...

JE: I'm going for the record by the way.

CD: For what?

JE: *(chuckling)* I'm taking a lot of time here...

CD: *(chuckling)* You're not, you're far from the record. I've done every one, you're far from it.

JE: I know... I uh...

CD: I'm nearly done. Anything you can think of **Tammy** that I didn't think about?

T: Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhm...

CD: He's really hit it pretty good.

T: Yeah, he was good. I'm trying to think back... anything.

JE: Well, I'd... I... I...

26:00

CD: Is there anything, Jack, maybe this is best posed to you, is there anything that I've missed that's important to your Pearl Harbor experience and what the day of infamy has come to be in our country.

JE: I would like to say that uh, that the Navy was, is especially good to me. They sent me to pilot training, they gave me a temporary commission, I was a permanent enlisted man. And then about a year after that, they opened up for ex-enlisted people and reservists to become regular commissioned officers, and I was one of those selected, and to prepare me for my new duties, they sent me to 5 semesters at UCLA which was supposed to provide for the academic equivalent of the Naval Academy, and they sent me to general line school which was supposed to prepare me for the equivalent of the military training at the Naval Academy. And, uh, I served 33 and ½ years, I went to all kinds of special schools; CIC, combat intelligent center; uh I, went to the Air Force War College as an exchange. I went to night school while I was in the Pentagon for a couple of tours, and got my bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland. And when I was at the Air Force War College, I got my master's degree in International Affairs, and this was all because of the opportunity I got in the Navy Program. And uh, where else but in America could you do something like that? I don't think there's another country in the world who gives that kind of opportunity to their people. **(28:35)** And so I'm pretty proud of the Navy, and America, and what they do, and the way they keep trying to do it, you know, and uh, I love the Navy. I had several commands, I commanded the United States Pyro, an ammunition ship, off the coast of Vietnam during the Vietnamese War. I commanded a helicopter squadron, I commanded a submarine warfare group, I was a captain for eight years and two of my jobs were in Admiral's billets, so I had my own flag. And uh, it... where else but America could you do those kinds of things? Recapping, just

for a moment on Pearl Harbor... we, there were two major oversights of the Japanese. That was they didn't hit the repair facility and they didn't hit the tank farm. The uh, the United States really set us up, or the Navy did, because every day, every month, every week we went to sea while I was... I got to Hawaii in August of 1941, and August, uh through the early part of December we were all, every 5 days during the week we were at sea, and for the weekend we were in port, and we were always moored in the same spot. So, we were really set up for the Japanese, and their spies, and their collection agencies. They knew the names of which ship was where, and so there was a lot of oversight by some pretty high ranking people. In (*severe mic noise in left channel*) my personal opinion, I don't feel sorry for the (*mic noise stops*) commanders who got fired for that. And uh, it's been a big controversy. And uh, I know Pearl Harbor survivors are split on whether or not Roosevelt knew that Pearl Harbor was gonna' be attacked. (*severe mic noise in left channel*) Uh, I personally don't believe that he knew it, and the reason I don't believe he knew it is because America can't keep a secret. And if it had been a secret, someone would have spilled the beans by now, and they didn't.

31:58 END OF TAPE